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# The Centrality of Actors and Interfaces in the Understanding of New Ruralities: A Chinese Case Study

Norman Long and Liu Jinlong

**Abstract:** This paper aims to demonstrate the advantages of adopting an ethnographic, actor interface approach to understanding the ongoing dynamics of rural development and policy intervention processes. It does so through the discussion of an EU-funded project orientated to introducing village-level forest-management practices in north-west China. The case highlights the ongoing everyday struggles over livelihoods and resources and focuses on the negotiations that take place between the various social actors involved. The case analysis is preceded by a broad-sweep overview of the rise of new ruralities and a discussion of the key elements of an actor interface analysis. The article concludes with a call for more cross-country and cross-regional studies of this kind.

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**Keywords:** China, actors, interface analysis, rural development, local politics, negotiations

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## Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> illustrates the value of adopting an actor interface approach<sup>2</sup> (Long 1984: 179, 2001; Long and Long 1992; Arce and Long 2000) for understanding the dynamics and predicaments of rural development intervention and change. It does this through the discussion of an attempt to set up a village-based forest-management project in north-west China. Our principal aim is to identify the critical interface encounters and track the ongoing negotiations that take place between the key actors involved. However, before entering into the details of the case, let us first place China within the context of the kinds of new ruralities that have emerged within the global world in which we now live. This overview will be followed by a condensed statement of the main features of actor interface analysis.

## The Rise of New Ruralities

Worldwide statistical trends and comparative case study data over the past two decades have underlined the increased involvement of small-scale agricultural producers in global commodity markets, either directly or through contracts with corporate organizations. This of course applies to both outputs and inputs, and holds for large-scale, entrepreneurial and smallholder farming. Due to the predominance of small peasant holdings in China, we focus primarily on the latter. However, this trend has not been associated with increased homogenization of the rural economy, but rather with processes of diversification wherein the lines between agricultural, industrial and service activities or between rural and urban locations have become increasingly blurred. Indeed, in the Chinese context the division between the “interior” and “exterior” of rural life has

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- 1 Here we wish to express our sincere thanks to Heather Zhang and Flemming Christiansen of the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds, for motivating us to compose this text and for their many helpful comments on its content and argument.
  - 2 Norman Long first introduced the notion of social interface for analysing ‘the often large gap between the rhetoric of national planning and policy and what happens ‘on the ground.’ (Long 1984: 179). This entailed giving close attention to the study of the interactions and negotiated outcomes that emerged in encounters between local and external actors. Later Long extended the idea of interface to embrace more broadly social discontinuities based on discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge, and power (see Long 1992, 2001; Arce and Long 2000).

become increasingly ambiguous, spatially and in terms of authority. Thus, although from the point of view of many local inhabitants the present-day township/ town (*xiang/ zhen*) may be conceptualized as being largely “outside” the domain of administrative and natural villages (*xingzhengcun/ zirancun*), its officials nevertheless retain a strategic degree of authority over such populations, similar to what Jean Oi (1998) calls “local state corporatism”. In a similar manner, one might also plot the ways in which control over specific corporate units such as rural collective enterprises has shifted from “insiders” to “outsiders” or to returnee migrants, and sometimes even vice versa. A vivid account of how “insider”-“outsider” boundaries have shifted or been re-drawn in a southern Chinese village, placed in the wider context of China’s rapid processes of industrialization, urbanization and globalization, is provided by Chan, Madsen, and Unger (2009: chapter 13-15). Their study also provides clear evidence of the centrality of interface encounters involving state and other actors, thus revealing the different kinds of social discontinuity that arise.

Many such changes are accompanied by conflict over land and resources, leading to modifications in legal frameworks affecting land use and management, as well as in the deployment of technology and networks of technical and service personnel serving the farm. China itself is currently within the throes of dealing with such complex land-related issues, which in many cases can be traced back to the introduction (in the early 1980s) of the “household contract responsibility system”, based upon the leasing out of collective property to individual households. As several recent studies have highlighted, this change has resulted in a mismatch between the “privatization” of capital and, to a degree, agricultural labour vis-à-vis the continued ownership of land exercised by the state and the collective (Ho 2005: 7-11). Yet whether in China or elsewhere – and whatever the policy measures adopted by the state or regional government – it is evident that agrarian transformation remains relatively self-generating, in the sense that change cannot simply be imposed or dictated by outside authorities or power holders. The different actors involved – peasant smallholders, indigenous communities, commercial farmers, corporate companies, agricultural bureaucrats, credit banks, various farmers’ organizations, property developers, and in some cases city folk moving into the countryside to enjoy a more rural lifestyle – all struggle to advance their own particular interests and have a say in what happens to rural resources over the short and longer term. In re-

cent years, rural research in China has moved towards addressing these complex and actor-driven processes. For example, Murphy (2002: chapter 7) analyses the dynamic role played by migrant returnees (including women) in investing in the local economy in Jiangxi Province and in lobbying for changes to local tax policies, thereby generating opportunities for more diversified livelihoods and building rural towns.

A central component of agrarian change is the construction and transformation of values in commodity networks. Here research has focused on the dynamics of value creation and transformation at the level of local producers as well as that associated with the passage of commodities through arenas of processing, marketing, retailing and consumption. The organization of marketing and retailing should not, however, be reduced to the process of adding economic value to commodities. Rather, it constitutes a series of interlocking arenas of struggle in which the various parties involved contest notions of “quality”, “convenience” and “price” (for a Mexican/ Californian case see Long and Villarreal 1998). Augustin-Jean’s (2009) study of the sugar industry in China combines a commodity-chain analysis with actor-network theory (Callon and Law 1995). Moreover, farmers and agricultural workers sometimes fear that heavy commitment to outside markets and institutions will threaten or marginalize their interests. In such circumstances, they may show strong allegiance to existing lifestyles, and to the defence of local knowledge and livelihood practices. On the other hand, if intervening parties, such as transnational companies, the state or retail organizations, fail to take seriously the ways in which people mobilize and use resources through existing social networks and cultural commitments, they run the risk of being rejected by, or distanced from, the life experiences and priorities of local producers.

It is important, therefore, to be alert to the dangers of assuming the potency and driving force of external institutions and interests – whether global or national – since they represent only one set among a large array of actors who shape outcomes. While many previous studies on rural China have stressed the centralist character of the state and its capacity to impose policy “solutions” on various sectors of the rural population, in recent years this approach has given way to a burgeoning of field studies that have challenged this simplistic position. Among these studies are a series of detailed ethnographies of village politics and the subtle manoeuvres devised by both township- and village-level leaders and their supporters in order to successfully subvert or re-channel funds towards

their own pet projects. For example, Wang (2003) explores the non-linear nature of “participatory” development intervention, in this case a project funded by a German NGO offering to finance local household credit schemes. The project’s goal was rejected by all local leaders in favour of using the funds to upgrade their existing water supply system. So, in the end, the donor had to back off and go along with local wishes. The project was particularly interesting because – in true “participatory” spirit – the researcher herself was a main figure in the participatory intervention team. This, as it were, allowed her to act as the candid camera of the project and thus the means by which to question a number of accepted wisdoms, theoretical and practical, characteristic of participatory projects in general.

The organizational forms that result will be complex and varied. Each “solution” or assemblage represents a specific configuration of interlocking actor “projects” generated by the encounters, negotiations and accommodations that take place between them, even though some may never in fact meet face to face (Long and van der Ploeg 1994; Long 2001: 49-72). The influence of actors who are remote from the actual situation is especially pertinent in an age where information technology increasingly penetrates everyday life. Many farmers (even in the poorest of countries) now communicate through mobile phones with their foremen and farm workers in the fields, and possess computers that can directly access national and global commodity markets for up-to-date information on prices and product turnover. In addition, wage-earning migrants living outside their communities of origin constitute an important source of information and capital. Their remittances not only subsidize the incomes and livelihood activities of family and other kin at home, but they may also be crucial for establishing new income-generating activities and sustaining new lifestyles in the migrants’ places of origin.

We can therefore no longer take for granted that rural space equals agricultural space or that the central problems for analysis can be reduced to what has been called the “agrarian question”, namely, the debate concerning the significance of proletarianization versus peasantization of the countryside that was a major preoccupation of agrarian social scientists during the 1970s and 1980s (see Kautsky 1899; de Janvry 1981; Harriss 1982; Goodman and Redclift 1981; and many articles in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*) or even the recent stress on “repeasantization” in an era of globalization (van der Ploeg 2007). That is, we should not privilege

agricultural production over other income-earning livelihood activities; we should also go beyond agricultural production and resource issues to look more generally at the utilization of countryside resources. This means a concern for landscape and environmental dimensions, recreation and leisure time pursuits, and the management of forest and water resources.

Adopting this broader view of rural space and activities requires finding ways of bridging evident disjunctures between distinct bodies of research, for example, those of rural sociology and economics and those of ecological and environmental studies. Whereas the former have generally focused on issues of production, consumption and commodity values in the context of state intervention and globalization, the latter have principally concerned themselves with the conceptual issue of how to relate natural resource and environmental issues to social phenomena. Here there is a need to synthesize these contrasting perspectives so as to achieve greater insight into questions of diversity and change in the countryside.

Returning to the Chinese case, we need to acknowledge that in the past rural space has often been identified with collective/ village land, designated primarily for the production of staple grains and worked by peasants, often under unfavourable or exploitative conditions and in association with a policy of rural industrialization. In contrast, in recent years, the discourse has revolved around issues of the “ecological stewardship” of land and natural resources, and the encouragement (wherever possible) of the production of “high-quality”, “high-yield” and “high-priced” products, such as those cultivated organically or collected in the countryside (for instance, medicinal herbs and “exotic” mushrooms), combined with the promotion of leisure zones and farm tourism.

These ecological and environmental issues raise central global questions about how to attribute value to “nature” and “landscapes”. Local actors (for example, farmers and traders) and outside professionals (for example, agricultural extensionists, pollution officers, conservationists and research scientists) usually differ in their assessments and priorities, and also in the way they represent “nature–man” relations and the “environment” more generally. There is also the more pragmatic question of what measures to use in promoting more sustainable management of natural resources. Here the focus is on how the state attempts to control people and territory as opposed to how people *in situ* go about utilizing

and conserving resources and biodiversity. For example, indigenous peoples often have quite different conceptions of their rights and relationship to territory than do national governments; the latter are faced with the choice of implementing “centralized” or “decentralized” modes of control – the latter implying some community involvement in natural resource management.

Nowadays environmental policies are constrained by a host of regulatory prescriptions and subject to pressure from powerful conservationist lobbies at the national and international level. Coupled with these environmental and conservation issues is a booming eco-tourism industry, which is often, as suggested above, critically important for the livelihoods of many rural inhabitants.

A further way in which rural space is being reconfigured concerns the movement of rural producers and families from comparatively disadvantaged localities or regions to more resource-rich rural locations. While this may be due to economic incentives or to the pressures of structural adjustment in a global world, out-migration has also taken the form of displacement due to civil strife, natural disasters or the construction of large-scale development projects such as the colossal Three Gorges Dam on the Yangzi River in central China. Resettlement in new habitats (whether voluntary or forced, planned or not) and the occasional return of some settlers to their places of origin is associated with processes of social dislocation, the rebuilding of livelihoods, and the social reconstruction of communities and groups. This situation challenges policy practitioners to find ways of resolving these problems in accordance with the expressed wishes and adaptive capacities of the groups affected. Government-initiated resettlement schemes abound throughout rural China, and there is much debate about how one should classify them (that is, as “spontaneous”, “voluntary”, “compulsory” or a mixture). Lin Zhibin (2003) provides an interesting comparative analysis of two contrasting cases of resettlement in Ningxia Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province.

The understanding of rural/ urban phenomena also warns against treating rural and urban areas as distinct entities, since the livelihoods of rural and urban households are often integrally bound up with each other. It is important here, however, to emphasize that relations between rural and urban spaces in China are hampered by the *hukou* system of residential affiliation, whereby persons of rural origin are classified as separate from those of urban origin. The main implication of this is that



migrants from rural areas working in urban zones are not officially entitled to remain there indefinitely, nor do they receive the same level of rights to education, health care and housing as do urban-registered people. On the other hand, rural *hukou* status gives one the right to farm a portion of village land and to acquire a plot on which to build one's family house, as well as access to education and a minimum level of health services. Nowadays, and mainly due to the increase in the number of workers and residents of rural origin in the urban areas, this *hukou* system is under pressure. Moreover, since the economic downturn in autumn 2008, which led to the laying off of thousands of industrial workers and the like, there have been much larger numbers of people seeking to secure the benefits of a basic survival strategy back in their home villages which they left many years ago. Principally for these reasons, the dual system of citizenship is now under considerable pressure to change.

Despite these close interconnections, much public investment continues to concentrate on the betterment of urban infrastructure and services, to the detriment of the needs of rural village populations. This has sharpened the divide between urban and rural areas and increased the income/ inequality gap. Urban growth has often been associated with industrialization policies and the state's control of food prices, fiscal transfers and investment, which have sometimes been combined with careful monitoring and control of the flow of labour from rural areas. Underpinning this policy portfolio is the view that equates urban scenarios with "modernity" while the rural scene is depicted as poorer and "backward". Concomitant with this is the fact that the rural areas generally lag behind urban areas in terms of labour productivity and per capita income.

Although shaped by its own specific history and modes of agrarian change, contemporary China is no exception to the problematics of the new ruralities outlined above. Indeed, it invites cross-country comparative research with other similar large "transitional economies" such as India, Brazil and Mexico. A central issue – which for reasons of space we cannot enter into here – concerns the need to identify relevant theoretical and methodological frameworks for pursuing such comparative research. Long's research in Latin America has been geared towards developing an actor interface approach for understanding rural transformations. Such a theoretical orientation also provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of contemporary rural change in China. The rest of this article is devoted to elucidating the main features of this ap-

proach as it applies to a participatory forestry project in north-west China conducted by Liu Jinlong.

## Actors and Interfaces

The main advantage of adopting an actor interface perspective for understanding social change and development is its recognition of the central significance of “human agency”, self-organizing processes and the mutual determination of so-called “internal” and “external” factors and relationships (Long 1984, 1989, 2001; Long and Long 1992). This approach requires focusing on the lifeworlds and interlocking “projects” of actors, and developing theoretically grounded methods of social research that allow for the elucidation of social meanings, purposes and powers. It also requires delving more deeply into the social and cultural discontinuities and ambiguities inherent in what Long and Long (1992) have called the “battlefields of knowledge” that shape the relations between local actors, development practitioners and other interested parties, including the researchers themselves.

This image of the “battlefields of knowledge” was chosen to convey the idea of contested arenas in which actors’ understandings, interests and values are pitched against each other. It is here – in the field of intervention primarily, though not exclusively since knowledge dilemmas and controversies also shape the writing and analysis of policy documents and reports, as well as research findings – that struggles over social meanings and practices take place. It is here too that we see most clearly the emergence of various kinds of negotiated orders, accommodations, oppositions, separations and contradictions. Such battlefields arise within and across many different institutional domains and arenas of social action. They are not confined to the local scene or framed by specific institutional settings such as development projects or broader policy programmes. Nor do they involve only interactions between so-called “beneficiaries” and “implementers”. Indeed, they embrace a wide range of social actors committed to different livelihood strategies, cultural interests and political trajectories.

Methodologically this calls for a detailed ethnographic understanding of everyday life and of the processes by which images, identities and social practices are shared, contested, negotiated, and sometimes rejected by the various actors involved. As we illustrate below, the notion of social interface provides a useful heuristic device for identifying and analys-

ing the critical points of intersection between different fields or levels of social organization. It is at these interfaces that discrepancies and discontinuities of values, interests, knowledge and power are revealed.

Let us now transfer something of what has been learned from interface studies elsewhere to rural China. A striking recent study that suggests the significance of interface analysis is that of Augustin-Jean (2009), who explores the entanglements of different key actors in the management of sugar production. For example, he argues that in spite of the strong discourse on introducing market mechanisms into the production, processing and commercialization of sugar, it is interorganizational social practices and key-actor networks locked into state bureaucratic control that explain how the industry works. Thus, the so-called economic liberalization measures in China are re-assessed for what they essentially are – that is, a series of interlocking actor projects crosscutting different sociopolitical domains and entailing a range of negotiations between the different actors involved. As Augustin-Jean argues, formulating the processes in this way helps one to better appreciate the intricacies of how, in China, the interests of the central state, local governments, and private and state-owned enterprises interconnect and how these processes affect (sometimes positively but also negatively) the agency and room for manoeuvre of sugar producers and local groups.

These findings dovetail well with actor interface studies of Mexican state-promoted irrigation schemes producing sugar (see van der Zaag 1992; Guzman-Flores 1995). A common component of both the Chinese and Mexican studies is how issues of power, knowledge and organization shape the contours, dynamics and outcomes of rural development intervention. Detailed and theoretically well-informed studies of this kind are, as yet, thin on the ground in China, although, as we emphasize later, several young Chinese scholars have taken up the challenge. In the following section, we review a recent ethnographic study of issues of forest development during the mid-2000s in north-west China (Liu 2006).

## Forest Management, Livelihoods, and Local Politics: A Chinese Case

In today's world, forests are on the frontline of debates concerning environmental protection and livelihood improvement (Liu et al. 2004). Forests entail issues of people's livelihoods, daily politics, and arenas of

struggle and conflict, where, as Doornbos, Saith, and White put it, “both trees and local forest dwellers usually find themselves on the losing side” (Doornbos, Saith, and White 2000). The visibility of these unresolved conflicts has spurred theoretical rethinking, policy interventions and institutional reforms (Fairhead and Leach 2000), yet neither development practitioners nor local actors have yet developed a solid basis for resolving them.

Over the decades, forest tenure in China has shifted in emphasis and each change, it seems, has been followed by a new turn towards the further destruction of forests (see Edmonds 1994). Thus, policy swings from collectivization to decollectivization and centralization to decentralization have been full of contradictions and have seldom been able to stem this depletion of forest resources. Concomitant with this has been the fact that forest development has until recently fallen short of being a pro-poor environmental policy.

In the early 1990s, in response to international concerns about forest development, the international discourse on sustainable forest management (SFM) was imported into China; since then it has become a dominant feature in forest development. By 1998, due to national anxiety about environmental protection and the need to reduce the economic disparities between the western and eastern regions of China, SFM was formally integrated at the national level into the Natural Forest Protection Programme (NFPP) as well as the Programme for the Conversion of Farmland into Forest.

## The Natural Forest Protection Programme (NFPP)

The NFPP was launched in 1998 to improve China’s forest resources and to protect the ecological environment of its large rivers (Zhao and Xu 2001). The programme began by introducing a widespread ban on industrial logging in natural forests. Its central goal was to protect forest environments and watershed areas. It involved a great diversity of actors: farmers, foresters, and officials at various levels within government agencies, village communities, state forest farms, and government institutions (Zhang, Liu, and Zhang 2002). The areas chosen for the programme lay along the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River and the upper reaches of the Yangzi River, in the Northeast China and Xinjiang Autonomous Region where natural forests had provided significant economic value through the logging of timber and associated employment opportunities. The NFPP was made responsible for forest protec-

tion and afforestation and for imposing a ban or reduction on the amount of logging in its areas. Concomitantly, however, it brought with it a whole series of new social problems and contradictions (Zhang, Liu, and Zhang 2002). Zhang calculates, for example, that it has involved the redeployment of 1.2 million laid-off workers and has negatively affected the subsistence needs of some five million people living within the forest areas. In Gansu Province's Xiaolongshan forest region in north-west China logging was banned, equipment stored away, timber transportation halted, and many of the wood-processing industries shut down. The inhabitants were then required to protect the forests. However, it was simply impossible for the over one million rural people living in this forest region to protect the natural forests and at the same time satisfy their own basic needs, most of which were related to forestry and various forest activities (Liu 2003).

The NFPP brought with it considerable upheaval rather than a smooth process of gradual change. Faced with abrupt changes in forestry policy and practice, rural people, foresters, village communities and state forest farms have had to adjust to new controls and procedures, and sometimes even to seek out new modes of livelihood. In similar vein, government officials have struggled to implement new and unfamiliar policy, laws and enforcement measures. Such change has brought with it a reconfiguring of power, knowledge and social relationships, and has raised the question of how far the NFPP has in fact been able to promote environmentally friendly practices.

The implementation of the NFPP by the Xiaolongshan State Forest Bureau ushered in new forest management objectives, funding and reforestation mechanisms, followed by the creation of new job specifications and new kinds of industry. One important outcome of this was the significantly increased influence of the state forest farms, each endowed with different levels of forest resources and farm staff at different skill levels within the bureau. The latter's status was further reinforced through augmenting their salaries and welfare benefits, while the power of the state farms was strengthened through the application of stricter measures of forest maintenance, such as bans on grazing. These measures led to the virtual denial of farmers' traditional use rights by introducing the notion of "guardianship", to be exercised by the state forest farms. As a result, the division between state farms and rural communities, as two competing beneficiary groups, was made starker; and this, in turn, impacted on the implementation and efficiency of the NFPP.

As for the village communities, their patterns of land use, household income, and daily life remain heavily dependent on natural forest resources. However, the NFPP's strict controls over livestock grazing, the collection of firewood and Chinese herbal medicines, and the harvesting of small-sized lots of timber and bamboo (used mainly for green house construction for vegetable production) have led to a dramatic reduction in peasants' farm incomes. Thus, through its various measures, the implementation of the NFPP has simply intensified discrimination based upon the division between persons identified as villagers and those residing on state forest farms. A further implication of NFPP is the redistribution of benefits and resources. This is reflected in the fact that the gap between different socio-economic groups in Xiaolongshan Forest Region has widened, with many village populations now facing greatly reduced access to forest resources. These outcomes are principally the result of how key actors in local government and the state forest farms have interpreted and manipulated central government policy in order to strengthen their own political leverage and share of the benefits derived from forest reforms. However, in order to achieve this, they have sometimes had to align themselves strategically with powerful cliques within the rural communities and have accordingly rewarded them with some of the spoils of the new programme. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that some villagers or traders negotiate deals with the forest guards in order to extract a quantity of timber to sell (that is, beyond the amount permitted for house construction). This usually involves offering cash to frontline forestry staff who justify receiving this by arguing that it supplements the low wages they earn.

Nevertheless, despite these "irregularities", the majority of village inhabitants who live close to forest areas have lost out in terms of earnings and employment to the more strategically located actors who live in the townships and county headquarters and who find work directly and indirectly connected to "forest-protection" activities. It is, of course, worth noting here that the widely-adopted concept of "sustainable forest management" is in itself quite vague and leaves plenty of space for the various actors involved to reinterpret its meaning (Liu 2007). Thus, at the central government level, international discourse and debates on SFM contribute to the retention of the importance of the forestry sector in the Chinese political economy, and are used to boost the mandate of the State Forestry Administration, the highest-level government body. The results, however, run somewhat counter to the state's ideological

stress on the importance of achieving greater equity and “harmonious” social development. Correcting such tendencies is complex and the measures designed to do so often produce contradictory outcomes. For example, over the past decade, the state has promoted decentralized fiscal and administrative reforms, encouraging local governments and state-owned enterprises to become more development-oriented and autonomous. However, this has not necessarily led to better governance, since the financial and other rewards offered by the state and earmarked to encourage this shift in policy have sometimes been funnelled into projects which local governments believe are better suited to their own local priorities. This is evidently the case in respect to some investments channelled through the NFPP.

### **The EC-funded Village Forestry-management Project: Researcher Turns Activist**

On the basis of long-term experience as a forester-cum-researcher in the Xiaolongshan Forest region, and with the aim of contributing to the ongoing debate on how to combine the improvement of rural livelihoods with effective environmental protection, Liu Jinlong decided (in 2002) to pilot a village-based forest-management planning exercise with funding from the European Community. As a researcher, he was charged with carrying out basic research on the relations between forest resources and local livelihoods and was also expected to assist local people in resolving whatever forest-related problems might arise. Yet, as the following case study illuminates, he also had his own visions of what might be considered “good” forest and community practice.<sup>3</sup> His intention was to achieve a “win-win” situation by which natural forests and rare species would be protected while, at the same time, local inhabitants would develop improved and more sustainable livelihoods. He invited Elm State Forest Farm, the local forestry authorities and nearby village inhabitants to jointly design and implement a plan for managing the surrounding forests. The programme was ambitious and had the following objectives:

1. To develop unified village forestry-management planning (VFMP) in each selected village by combining and coordinating forest pro-

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<sup>3</sup> On the role and legitimacy of activist scholarship and applied social research, see Hale 2008.

- tection with the state programme for converting farmland into forest and pasture; to co-manage the collective and state-controlled forests within village boundaries; and to set up, with the participation of local people, village forest-management committees (VFMCs) in 10 selected project villages.
2. To promote eco-tourism, participatory land-use and landscape planning to improve local livelihoods.
  3. To widen people's involvement in the implementation of forest protection and help local farmers to develop cash crops by taking advantage of the organization and technical capacity of the state forest farms.

The direct beneficiaries were to be those living in the administrative village of Estuarine. Based on the experiences gained there, the multidisciplinary team would then develop guidelines for use in the other nine villages selected. The planning would include piloting and testing the protection of unique species without setting up a protection zone, and providing technical and financial assistance, especially to poor households and rural women, in order to set up forest-protection and environmentally friendly activities. It was also hoped that the project would provide – through the establishment of a village-based forest-management committee – new incentives for rural farmers to organize themselves more autonomously. Seed money was made available to initiate activities and to explore ways of covering future operational and management costs. In addition, the project would provide environmental education and promote farming and eco-tourism training for farmers.

Liu Jinlong (2006) provides a detailed account of his attempts to persuade the members of the existing village committee to support this idea and to organize the election of the members of the VFMC. He saw this election as an opportunity to involve a much wider sample of local people and views than the existing village committee allowed. The latter was predominantly made up of long-serving members. Wang, the village party secretary, who had little schooling, had been appointed by the Communist Party after leaving the army in 1980 and had been reconfirmed in this position ever since. Hao, the village chairman, who earned his living as a driver-cum-electrician in the building industry, also boasted a long period in office, though in recent years he had come to rely on his much younger appointed deputy: an accountant with several years experience working for the local government in Willow Township who



retained a useful network of contacts in administrative and political circles. The rest of the village committee was composed of the heads of various production teams (natural villages) that fell under the jurisdiction of Estuarine Village. It quickly emerged that the majority of these were connected through kinship and/ or affinal ties with two principal family lineages (Feng and Cai). These two lines had converged in a prominent family cluster whose members had eventually become spread out between Estuarine Village and Stamp County headquarters, where many had acquired a secondary school education and found secure employment. However, like other similar genealogical maps, there were hidden tensions, rivalries and flashpoints that threatened the viability of collaborative ventures. This became evident during the village election campaign when a prominent farmers' leader and spokesman for the Feng/ Cai family group spoke harshly about the present committee's mismanagement of village affairs and the need to vote them out in the coming election. He directed his most vitriolic comments at Wang, the village party secretary, who, with the backing of the township authorities, was able to fend off the attack.

This quick sketch of the composition of the Estuarine Village Committee indicates how its members were embedded in an intricate pattern of family, friends, partners and patrons. This was, of course, a source of cohesion when negotiating with external donors – including in this case the participative, “bottom-up” ambitions of the research practitioner himself. At the same time, however, these relationships constituted an arena of discourse and struggle, for example, when the installation of the new village forest-management committee was debated. In the end, the township authorities won out by insisting that the election for the VFMC should take place on the same day as that planned for the village committee, the underlying rationale being to ensure that the new forest project did not conflict with the existing interests of the party, the local government or the state forestry bureau. On the other hand, the existing members of the village committee itself needed to maintain strong working relations with the township-level officials, even if this meant sharing with them some of the benefits and spoils (both material and symbolic) brought by the new project.

Moreover, from the point of view of the incumbent members of the existing village committee, it was also imperative to avoid the possibility that the new VFMC might become the seedbed for strengthening the hand of their political rivals within Estuarine Village and its surrounding

hamlets. Hence, they manoeuvred, together with the township cadres, to restrict as far as possible the election of new political leaders who would most likely challenge the modus operandi of existing forest-management practice and its associated patterns of resource distribution. Much to Liu Jinlong's disappointment, this strategy proved largely successful: the elected personnel of the two committees overlapped significantly when the votes were cast.

## Concluding Comments on the Forestry Case

In summary, then, this pilot planning exercise, aimed at developing a strategy for improving forest protection and the livelihoods of the rural poor by increasing the level of participation of local farmers and their households in forest management, proved difficult. It was obstructed, and to a degree dismantled, by the pattern of local politics and by the leverage exercised by actors representing dominant interests and institutions. Of course, its implementation was not made any the easier by its timing, which coincided with the county-wide elections for village leaders and committees that take place every three years.

Liu Jinlong's study explores the dynamics of people's livelihoods and their responses to the introduction of participatory village forest management and explores the incongruence between forest policy and forest-use practices. Both the NFPP and EC projects involved a great variety of actors including individuals, such as rural farmers and foresters; officials at various levels of government agencies; and institutional actors, such as local village communities, state forest farms, and local government departments. The various interventions were aimed at modifying existing forest policy and forest-use practices that affected a wide range of rural inhabitants and others concerned with land use, livelihood and environmental issues. As we noted earlier, as a result both the village communities and state forest farms faced a restructuring of their sources of income and modes of organization; and concurrent with these changes was the need for government officials to adopt new and unfamiliar policies, laws and enforcement measures. Hence, the two central questions explored in the field study were: How do the different actors react to planned forestry interventions and thus give local meanings to imported international discourses on sustainable forest management? And how do they develop their own "policy" views and forest-use practices? Underlying both questions is the importance of exploring the

range of compromises and accommodations that the various key actors negotiate vis-à-vis each other. For reasons of space, we have limited our discussion primarily to identifying the kinds of political struggles that take place at the interface between village and township levels.

Confronted with the many problems posed by the implementation of the NFPP, the researcher, Liu Jinlong, succeeded in securing EC funding for a pilot forestry project aimed at creating what he called “a conceptual roadmap” directed towards achieving more sustainable forest-management practice. He explains that such an approach should be more “holistic, integrated, pro-poor and participatory”. It should also focus on removing institutional barriers, establishing community-based organizations, promoting partnership among the different actors, carrying out joint management of state-owned forests with local village communities, and enhancing ecology-friendly alternative livelihoods. Yet his research strongly demonstrates that there is no direct link between intervention and output. Indeed, it highlights how the various actors – whether organizations representing a specific group of people, or particular individuals – create sufficient space for interpreting forest management in accordance with their own experience, knowledge and interests.

## Final Analytical Remarks

This article raises both theoretical/ methodological and empirical/ comparative issues. In the first place, we emphasized the usefulness of adopting an actor interface analysis for probing the dynamics and emergent negotiations inherent in processes of policy intervention and rural change – a central issue here being the need to document the strategic interplay of interests, values, knowledge and sources of authority and power. To achieve this, we argued, requires detailed ethnographic research on the contexts and events of interface encounters wherein various social actors represent, defend and perhaps even “discover” their own personal or collective interests and value commitments. It is only by probing these relationships and processes that one comes to identify and understand the significance of specific sets of interlocking “actor projects” that, as it were, map out the topography of the political and social landscape in question. In short, actor interface analysis is better able to explain the emergent dynamics and outcomes of actor initiatives and changes in development scenarios, thus permitting more insightful inter-

pretations of the different responses to seemingly similar structures and processes of intervention.

These remarks lead to the complex issue of how to conduct comparative studies, which are central to achieving a fuller understanding of different national or regional trajectories of rural change and development. Rather than pursuing such comparisons at a macro-structural level that highlights the importance of differences between nation states in terms of their constitutional and organizational makeup, their economic development levels and market orientation, and their broad socio-cultural backgrounds, we have opted for a close-up view of specific arenas of change. The rationale for this is that one obtains a more nuanced and vibrant appreciation of how development policies and local constituencies are defined and reshaped in the process of intervention itself. Such a close-up view also highlights the many ambiguities and strategic manoeuvres utilized by the various actors in their struggles to reassert or redefine their priorities, social interests and network configurations. The Chinese case was chosen to demonstrate the versatility of an actor interface methodology for exploring such processes. It remains for other researchers to take up the comparative challenge by identifying key research questions for cross-country or cross-regional comparison.

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